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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000397

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ZI](#) [MDC](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER ON TALKS STALEMATE, POSSIBLE
ELECTION BOYCOTT

REF: (A) HARARE 351 (B) HARARE 312 (C) HARARE 298 AND
PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Officer Win Dayton under Section 1.5(b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai told the Ambassador on March 2 that MDC and ZANU-PF delegations in South Africa March 1 each rebuffed South African government efforts to convene a meeting between the two. He was encouraged by President Mbeki's meeting with the MDC delegation and by the South African leader's response to a recent letter Tsvangirai had conveyed. Tsvangirai advised that in the run-up to next March's scheduled national parliamentary election, the party would lay out explicit conditions necessary for a free and fair election and would continue to weigh a boycott if conditions were not met. He asserted that the party had gotten past publicized divisions associated with candidate selection for the upcoming Zengeza parliamentary by-election and expressed confidence that the party would carry the election absent significant manipulation by the ruling party. END SUMMARY.

South African Effort Stymied

12. (C) Tsvangirai told the Ambassador over lunch at the Residence that an MDC group, including Party Vice-President Gibson Sibanda, Secretary-General Welshman Ncube and Deputy Secretary-General Gift Chimanikire, visited South Africa

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early in the week to follow up on a meeting party representatives had had with a South African delegation (including Deputy Foreign Minister Pahad and Ambassador Ndou) the week before. Visiting South Africa at the same time was a ZANU-PF delegation that included principal talks-on-talks negotiator Justice Minister Patrick Chinamasa. Tsvangirai reported that the South Africans had surprised the Zimbabweans by proposing the two groups meet each other, an offer each delegation declined. He said the MDC delegation had demurred because neither party would have had any mandate; he surmised that ZANU-PF refused because it lacked instructions as well. Tsvangirai reported that the MDC group did meet with

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President Mbeki but that he lacked details on the meeting.

12. (C) Tsvangirai added that he had a productive letter exchange with Mbeki on the heels of Mugabe's birthday outburst, in which Mugabe appeared to rule out talks with the MDC and castigated African leaders for their lack of unified solidarity with him (ref A). Tsvangirai said he had sent Mbeki a letter in which he urged him to be more circumspect in his public comments on Zimbabwe and interparty talks; Mbeki had responded with appreciation for the MDC's constructive and flexible posture on dialogue, emphasizing that Zimbabwe's political crisis would have to be resolved by Zimbabweans and not an externally dictated solution.

13. (C) Tsvangirai asserted that the SAG wanted to increase contacts and to deepen its relationship with the MDC and was frustrated by ZANU-PF's intransigence. He implied that just weeks ago, the SAG appeared to be complicit in ZANU-PF efforts to freeze Tsvangirai outside negotiations, essentially serving to drive a wedge among MDC ranks and delegitimize Tsvangirai. He said the tone of Mbeki's letter suggested Mbeki was rethinking South Africa's equities in dialogue and its relative relations with the two parties.

Elections: To Boycott or not to Boycott...

14. (C) Turning to elections, Tsvangirai indicated that the party will be attaching highest priority on addressing the country's election environment, recognizing that MDC cannot possibly compete successfully in next March's parliamentary elections without significant changes being undertaken very soon. Tsvangirai planned to conduct a briefing of the diplomatic community to this effect on March 3 (reported

septel). The government's withdrawn invitation to the UN election assessment team laid bare its intention to conduct an unacceptable election and sharpened the situation's urgency. He suggested SADC norms and standards offered non-threatening benchmarks in that Zimbabwe had subscribed to them already. He pondered aloud the potential utility of a letter to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

15. (C) Tsvangirai stressed special concern about ruling party plans to manipulate food stocks to its electoral advantage, consistent with prior practices. He maintained that the GMB was clearing its existing stocks because it was not sufficiently treated to survive long storage; people were already complaining that some distributed stocks were rotten.

Adequate rains assured a decent harvest throughout much of the country and the government would supplement stocks with imports. The MDC could compete in areas where most of the population was food-sufficient, but government control of food distribution in other areas would give it potentially decisive advantage.

16. (C) Tsvangirai observed that there were compelling arguments each way on the prospects for a boycott, and the issue would be subject to ongoing debate within the party. For now, though, the party did not have to take a decision that would ultimately depend on the government's responsiveness in ameliorating the election environment.

17. (C) Tsvangirai did not elaborate on prospects for mass action, noting only that the party was "looking at options." He reported that the party was reviewing the methodology of mass action and recognized that stay-aways would not work. He reiterated the importance of coordinating a broad alliance with civil society. No single organization "owned" a potential process of mass action and each would be responsible for mobilizing its own constituency. He discounted potential disagreements over priorities and methodology among the MDC and civil society players, maintaining that all recognized the need to resolve the political crisis first in order to open the democratic space all needed to address their separate priorities.

By-election Preview

18. (C) Responding to adverse publicity over the party's contentious selection of a candidate to stand in the Zengeza parliamentary by-election scheduled later this month, Tsvangirai asserted that the difficulty was resolved and

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would not prejudice MDC chances in that contest. He allowed that the party needed to refine its selection process; in the meantime, however, he had to "step in" to stop in-fighting that was distracting the party from its ultimate objective of retaining the seat. He maintained that divisions surrounding the selection were not lasting and he expected to campaign in the urban jurisdiction on Sunday without any problem.

19. (C) Tsvangirai recognized that the yet-to-be scheduled MP by-election for Lupane could prove more problematic for the party. A rural district, Lupane was more remote and thus more vulnerable to manipulation by violence and politicized food distribution. The ruling party also was co-opting significant portions of the electorate through manipulation of influential chiefs, a practice that could be decisive in Lupane.

Leadership Shake-Up?

110. (C) Tsvangirai was somewhat evasive when queried about a rumored shake-up in the party's leadership. Alluding to press reports of fisticuffs between Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Moses Mzila-Ndlovu and senior adviser Eliphas Mukonoweshuro, he conceded that there had been a "regrettable" incident and that the party was going to reorganize its structures on international relations. Embassy will report on personnel shifts and other intra-party tensions via septel.

Comment

111. (C) Internal distractions are complicating the MDC's uphill electoral struggle. The opposition will have a hard time getting an uncompromising ruling party to address severe imbalances in the electoral environment, even superficially. Indeed, Chinamasa's reported announcement February 25 that the GOZ had no intention of making any changes to its electoral laws seemed calculated to goad the MDC toward a boycott. Notwithstanding both parties' snub, Mbeki's quiet effort to facilitate a meeting will serve to buoy the MDC, which has little prospect of commanding ZANU-PF's attention by itself.

SULLIVAN